

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON ON TUESDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2018

Prisoner access to secure mental health treatment

The latest report from the Inspector of Custodial Services has found major shortcomings in the provision of mental health services for prisoners. The Inspector, Neil Morgan, said:

Many prisoners have high mental health needs. Generally, these can be managed in a prison, provided the services and supports are properly resourced. But funding for prison health services has not kept pace with demand.

There are also some prisoners who are so unwell that they need to be in a forensic mental health facility, not a prison. I knew that demand for secure forensic mental health beds would outstrip supply, but the situation is worse than I'd expected.

The Frankland Centre is the state's only secure forensic mental health facility, and is far too small to cope with demand from the courts and the prisons. It's still the same size as when it opened in 1993, when the prison population was a third of what it is now. And WA has only 1.9 forensic beds per 100,000, compared with the national average of 3.4.

The report shows that majority of referrals made by clinical staff to the Frankland Centre lapse. Even when the person had multiple referrals, a third never accessed Frankland. Mr Morgan said:

These figures are disturbing enough, but true demand is even higher. Psychiatrists who work in prisons are so aware of the shortage of secure mental health beds that they only make referrals in the most urgent of cases.

Practices with respect to mental illness compare badly with practices for physical injuries or illness. If a prisoner is injured while working or playing sport, and needs an X-ray or treatment that the prison cannot provide, they will be taken to hospital under appropriate escort. Broken minds deserve the same priority as broken arms.

The shortfalls mean that the daily management of people with serious mental health needs is left to custodial staff, who have limited training, few management options and poor access to information. Mr Morgan said:

Within these limitations, custodial and clinical staff are making the system work as best they can, and they deserve the community's thanks. But they are really just applying band aids to a severely under-resourced system. This creates risks for the prisoners and places an unreasonable burden on staff.

While this report is the first to quantify the gap between prison referrals and actual placements, the problem of access to mental health care is well-known. There has been no

shortage of inter-agency meetings, in principle commitments, policy documents, and reports. But they have not yet led to change. Action appears to have stalled due to disagreements about funding. Mr Morgan said:

We must stop placing mentally unwell people in prison, not providing adequate access to treatment, releasing them, and expecting a good outcome. This doesn't serve their interests or those of the community.

It is not for us to debate who should fund what. The issues are known, the solutions are known, and something needs to be done.

I welcome the government's commitment to establishing a unit in Casuarina Prison that will give a sharper focus to mental health for male prisoners, but this will not be operational until 2020 and is only one small part of the equation.

Neil Morgan
Inspector

For more details, please see the Inspector's Overview to the Report and Key Findings (copies attached).

For Further Media Information

The Inspector, Mr Neil Morgan, will be available for comment from 12 noon on Tuesday 27 November 2018 and can be contacted on 0427 426 471.

The full report will be available on the Inspector's website (www.oics.wa.gov.au).